

Orange County bus drivers: Vote No on Teamster sellout! Prepare for strike!

Hong Jian
17 February 2022

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on Orange County, California, bus drivers to vote “No” on the tentative agreement (TA) that will be presented to them beginning Thursday, February 17.

Rejection of the contract must be combined with preparations for all-out strike action to win the demands of the workers, including substantial increases in real wages, adequate rest and mealtimes.

Teamsters Local 952 announced Wednesday afternoon that it had reached a third tentative agreement (TA) covering bus drivers with the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA). The TA was reached almost 11 hours after bus drivers were scheduled to go out on strike. The previous two TAs that Local 952 recommended for ratification were voted down by overwhelming margins.

While the Teamsters have refused to release details of the TA ahead of ratification, the first page of the TA was leaked and posted on social media shortly after the announced deal. It states that workers will receive a 4 percent raise effective immediately after the contract is signed (not to be applied retroactively to the expiry of the previous contract), another 4 percent raise beginning May 1, 2022 and then a 5 percent raise on May 1, 2023.

With inflation currently running at 7.5 percent, the pay raises that the union is touting amount to large paycuts for workers already receiving poverty-level wages.

While union representatives decried the release of this information, claiming that it contained a printing error and that the actual raises would be 4 percent, 5 percent and 5 percent, once they corrected the error, they did not dispute the accuracy of the rest of the leaked document.

Bus drivers at OCTA have been working without a contract since their last contract expired on April 30, 2021. In the interim Teamsters Local 952 has presented two TAs containing almost identical language to the previously expired contract.

In fact, the sole difference between the TA presented in August and the previous contract was a paltry 2 percent raise, which, with inflation currently running at 7.5 percent, means a paycut for workers.

According to Local 952 Secretary-Treasurer Eric Jimenez, many bus drivers have had to live in the Inland Empire because they cannot afford to live in Orange County on the wages they receive. The Inland Empire, located in San Bernardino and Riverside counties, is over 35 miles north of Orange County; and all three counties are adjacent to Los Angeles County.

The previous contract was so bad that Jimenez felt compelled to point out, “Meals and break periods are not in drivers’ contract. There is no provision, language, article or section in the contract that spells out breaks or meal periods.”

According to a press release from Teamsters Local 952, “The new agreement includes wage increases, bonus pay and critical contract language addressing meal and rest breaks for the nearly 600 Teamster Coach Operators.”

While the union claims that workers’ demands have been met, the union has not and does not plan to publicly release any details of the tentative agreement until and unless it has been ratified by the workers. But the workers themselves are not going to see the TA until then, although, according to the union, “bargaining committee members and union agents will be available to answer your questions” when workers begin voting starting Thursday, February 17. The vote will take place on Thursday and Friday and then continue into Sunday and end on Monday at 5:00 p.m.

The bonus pay consists of a \$2,000 signing bonus, which essentially covers the raise dating back to the end of the previous contract, although it does not contribute towards the bus drivers’ pensions, as pointed out by one Local 952 worker.

What about the “critical contract language addressing

meal and rest breaks” that the union mentions in its press release? Having the issues of meals and rest periods addressed is not the same as solving those issues. If they have been solved, bus drivers should be asking why “details of the agreement were not immediately released” And why “the details of the tentative agreement—reached about 10:30 a.m.—aren’t being released ... until the contract is ratified by union members and approved by the agency’s board of directors?”

Given the fact that OCTA has been intransigent during the previous 10 months of negotiations, bus drivers should ask what sort of contract language is included that both addresses meals and breaks and makes Mark Murphy, chairman of the OCTA board of directors, “very, very happy.”

This is the same Mark Murphy who late last week sent a letter to Governor Gavin Newsom requesting that he intervene in the dispute by appointing a board to investigate the labor dispute, as well as requesting him to ask the state’s Attorney General to file an injunction asking for a 60-day cooling off period immediately after the investigatory board returns with its report.

The fact that the union is keeping the TA under wraps until after workers vote is itself highly suspect. If the TA actually was in the best interests of workers, there would be no need for secrecy. The only reason to keep it a secret is because the deal is rotten, and the union hopes to pressure and intimidate workers into voting yes once they have them locked in a room.

Workers on social media said that a similar process occurred during voting on the previous TA. In that instance, workers were kept in the dark until they showed up to vote. When they arrived, they were given the self-serving “highlights” by the union and were told they were not allowed to leave the room until they voted. If they left beforehand, they would not be allowed to return to vote. A number of bus drivers chose to walk out without voting. Even then, the contract was rejected by a vote of 420 against and 75 for.

On Wednesday, one worker pointed that out on social media in a statement directed at a union official, “Isn’t this the third time you and the negotiating committee have given a proposal to the members for a vote? Is this the third time the negotiating committee has recommended a yes vote? It may or may not pass this time but the 2 previous times the members told you to stick it up your a**.

To me that’s eating crow and it sure doesn’t look like they trust your judgement.”

In response, the official had this to say, “I don’t know

where you keep getting your miss information [sic]. But again your [sic] incorrect. I’ve already given you more time than I should have. If you don’t hear any more responses to your future posts, it’s only because you don’t matter. For all others on here who want more information about the contract, you’ll get it when the time comes.”

OCTA bus drivers should vote “No” again on yet another rotten TA; but rejecting the deal is not enough. As has been demonstrated in one contract fight after another in the past year, after receiving a resounding no to their rotten deals, the unions do not return to the negotiation table determined to win a better deal for the workers. Instead, they return to the table to find a way to reword essentially the same rotten contract.

Most notable was the Kellogg’s strike last fall, when a leaked email from management exposed the callous backroom machinations of both union and management, stating, “In short, overall bucket of money (cost) stays the same. Just shifts money from one bucket to another. No gain overall for them [Kellogg’s workers] with 3 more weeks of strike and no income. No ratification bonus.”

To carry their struggle forward, bus drivers must take the leadership out of the hands of the union and put it under the democratic control of the workers themselves by forming an independent rank-and-file committee. This committee would decide on demands that meet the needs of workers and organize a program of struggle, uniting Orange County bus drivers with others transit workers and broader sections of the working class in a common offensive against the corporations.

Workers interested in learning more about building a rank-and-file committee or who would like to share information on their struggle should contact the WSWS.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact